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The Community-building Mission of Kamsá Ritual Language

The Kamsá Indians, resident in Colombia's Sibundoy Valley near the headwaters of the Putumayo River, confront the vagaries of human existence (which they define in terms of querulous spirits) through two complementary remedial measures, the blessing and the cure. Each pays homage to the ancestors (the "first people" or "grandfathers of our grandfathers"), finding in the ancestral period a formative moment in cosmic time, when the first people interacted directly with the celestial deities, when the spirits of plants and animals could take human form and speak as humans, when people could readily assume the form of animals, and when Our Lord and the saints and culture heroes walked the earth pronouncing judgments and setting precedents for all time. Blessing and cure hark back to this primordial epoch with its constitutive spiritual power as the key to health, happiness, and success in the modern world (see McDowell 1989).

The blessing is essentially a verbal instrument, with affinities to ceremonial dialogue in several native South American societies (Sherzer and Urban 1986; Urban 1986), to ceremonial speech forms in other parts of indigenous America (Gossen 1974; Tedlock 1976), as well as to Catholic prayer. At certain recurring moments in the life of the community, Kamsá Indians produce speeches using a special register of the language known as *jongwamiyan*, "speech of the *cabildo*" (the tribal council) but more often referred to as *el lenguaje ritual*, "the ritual language," or just *el lenguaje*, "the language." The cure, by way of contrast, contains a significant verbal component (the "singing to the spirits") but is characterized by the largely non-verbal shamanistic practices of the native doctors. The blessing operates at the inter-personal level, evoking and invoking the deities in the effort to sustain effective forms of social

collaboration (McDowell 1983). Its rhetoric is intensely Catholic—witness the pivotal phrase, *selokana taitabe botaman bendisiona*, “from heaven God’s beautiful blessing”—a reflection of its public character in this community long subject to missionary authority (Bonilla 1972). The cure, again in contrast, triggers an ecstatic recovery of the ancestors, often by way of the visionary effects of *yagé* (Banisteriopsis caapi), a hallucinogenic substance consumed by native doctors and their patients in the quest for spiritual cleansing. These cures manifest only a thin veneer of Catholicism (for example, the sign of the cross is made before ingesting *yagé*); they are targeted at *binyea*, “spirit sickness,” a dreaded condition rendering individuals and their families susceptible to injury, sickness, and death.

My concern in this paper lies with the public, interpersonal, and Catholic-inspired component in this spiritual armory, the blessing. I view Kamsá ritual language as a verbal resource for consecrating the present moment by linking its ephemera to the timeless model established by the ancestors, the Christian deities and saints in particular, but also by implication the indigenous “first people.” Ritual language speeches propose an ideal Kamsá community conceived as a utopian family, gathered together under God’s protection and united by bonds of reciprocal respect and allegiance. The social solidarity engendered by this tactic is used to persuade people to cooperate in specific tasks ranging from burying the dead to lending a hand in time of trouble. Each ritual language speech renews the social contract and confirms the underlying constitution of Kamsá sociability. The content of the speeches acknowledges the force of a communal interest, but this recognition of the collectivity hardly excludes the exercise of personal initiative, as we shall see. In the remainder of this paper I will describe the distinctive features of Kamsá ritual language as a marked speech variety, assess its place in the social calendar of the community, and examine (through recourse to a mythic narrative) the largely unspoken potential for advancing personal goals within the framework of this community-building speech register.

Description of the code

Kamsá ritual language is easily distinguished from other forms of Kamsá discourse. The pace of speech articulation tends to be rapid, attaining at full clip a velocity some three times that of ordinary, conversational speech. Intonational contours are levelled so that the voice lingers on only a few sustained pitches, creating a latticework of recurrent prosodic units aurally reminiscent of chanted Catholic prayer. Some speeches require simultaneous talk on the part of the two principal

interlocutors, something that is studiously avoided in other forms of Kamsá discourse. These characteristics of Kamsá ritual language in performance bring about a sonority readily discriminated even from a considerable distance.

Ritual language speeches pivot on strings of ponderous words fashioned mostly from Spanish-derived nominal and verbal roots, the latter encased in highly complex morphological environments. Nominals such as *delikado* (delicate, problematic), *okasion* (occasion, trouble), *remidio* (remedy), and *kardado* (charity, kindness), and verbals such as *pasentsia* (to forgive), *lesentsia* (to permit), and *kweda* (to protect), supply a weighty litany of Catholic affect. The verbal roots may be preceded by as many as a dozen morphemes in ritual language constructions, whereas four or five is usual in ordinary forms of Kamsá discourse.

Consider the following instance:

kwa-ta-bo-n-j-i-ye-t-en-o-xebwachina
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

- (1) *kwa*: an intensifier, in this instance marks the speaker's certainty, translates here as "surely."
- (2) *ta*: historical aspect, marks action that has been completed prior to the moment of speech, translates as past tense.
- (3) *bo*: benefactive, indicates that the action performed is of benefit to the actors or recipients, translates "for our good."
- (4) *n*: an affirmative evidential, indicates that the speaker is witness to the event named in the verb, translates as "so I see."
- (5) *j*: a verbal marker, appears in some morphological environments to indicate a verbal construction, does not translate into English.
- (6) *i*: first-person singular subject marker, "I."
- (7) *ye*: marker of legendary discourse, brings into play the ancestral realm, translates as "like our ancestors."
- (8) *t*: repetition marker, indicates that the event has happened before, translates as "again."
- (9) *en*: reciprocal marker, indicates that the action conjoins two or more participants, translates as "each other."
- (10) *o*: preverbal element, indicates that the event is accidental rather than designed, translates as "by chance."
- (11) *xebwachina*: the root meaning "to come together, to meet."

This string of semantic elements potentially produces a wordy translation into English: "So I see that it happens we have surely come together once again for our mutual benefit as in the days of the ancestors."

However, it is not at all clear that Kamsá ears and minds record each semantic nuance in this mechanical fashion. When asked to translate into Spanish phrases from the ritual language, my Kamsá consultants tended to produce skeletal renditions capturing the general sense of the utterance rather than each specific inflection of meaning. I suggest that these utterances are as much ritual objects as words, indices of ritual moment as much as semantic configurations (Murray 1977).

In any case, the fabrication of these intricate strings of morphemes is surely a major aspect of the verbal artistry manifested in ritual language speeches. Speakers formulate remarkable sequences of morphological units, in extreme cases probing the outer limits of intelligibility and acceptability. In this respect Kamsá ritual language discourse evinces the capacity of poetic speech forms to explore latent expressive possibilities of the code. This exploratory impulse creates innovative formulations that may be characterized as an enrichment rather than an impoverishment of discourse, contrary to the views expressed by Maurice Bloch (1974).

Another feature of Kamsá ritual language ties directly into its community-building mission: all personal address is accomplished through the use of kinship terms, thereby implementing the metacommunicative notion of the community as family. When people are not actually next-of-kin, these fictive categories are used:

- male addressee, vis-à-vis the speaker
 - of equal age: *taita*, "Father"
 - of lesser age: *taita sobren*, "Father Nephew"
 - of greater age: *taita bako*, "Father Uncle"
- female addressee, vis-à-vis the speaker
 - of equal age: *mama*, "Mother"
 - of lesser age: *base mama*, "Little Mother"
 - of greater age: *bata mama*, "Aunt Mother"

No other forms of personal address or reference are tolerated in the ritual language, which transforms every human encounter into a family affair.

Accompanying this selective use of address forms is a specialized vocabulary marking ritual language discourse as a form of "heightened" or "poetic" discourse. For example, the common word for "dog," *kex*, is shunned for the word used to refer to the powerful hunting dogs in the days of the ancestors, *shbwaya*. Some important objects are named in metaphorical constructions; thus *chicha*, the home brew prepared by the women from corn, is termed *diosbe trabajo*, "God's work," and whereas it actually circulates in large containers, it is always encountered as "a little drop" (*nye kanyetem*) in ritual language speeches.

Speeches are composed during performance through recourse to a secondary craft of language, a formulaic system gradually integrated into the adult speaker's competence, allowing for the spontaneous formulation of appropriate phrases. Speeches are concocted by locating three basic utterance types within characteristic global arrangements. Let's briefly inspect the manufacture of ritual language discourse.

The basic litany. A set of formulas and formulaic expressions endowed with manifest Catholic content, used to open and close speeches and to fill in gaps in the prosodic structure at almost any moment within the speech. These formulas range from a mere word or two to short sequences of lines.

(1) *apay* (Lord have mercy).

(2) *ar señor* (By Our Lord).

The first two examples are minimal forms used to express empathy with another speaker's discourse in progress.

(3) *ndoka remidio* (literally "without remedy," but I render it "so be it"), a ubiquitous formula used to partition speeches into chunks of discourse; some speakers use this formula to begin each poetic line.

(4) *a diosa lastema nday remidio* (By the grace of God so be it), a formula used by some speakers to open ritual language speeches and to mark successive discourse episodes.

(5) *kwaxojiitsebwakwedana* (Since they are surely protecting us), a formula that, as do others like it, continuously reminds of human dependence on the deities, especially God and the Virgin Mary, syncretized in Sibundoy folk religion as the sun and the moon, respectively (see McDowell 1989).

(6) *chentxa despuesna kanye kwenta jmaisana txetaye*

There, later, each must give account

alma pamillia persona

of soul, family, self.

This anticipation of the Christian judgment occurs as a free-floating element in the majority of ritual language speeches.

(7) *chabe mundo chabe lware*

In His world, in His place

tsjiyetsashekwastona

I am following in the footsteps of the ancestors.

Another frequent formula that expresses a key concept in the metacom-

municative charter of the blessing; note its integration of Christian and indigenous antecedents.

Occasion-marking discourse. Another set of utterances allows speakers to signify the generic occasion in which their speeches are embedded. These passages reveal the capacity of stylized language to embrace the particular; they tend to be less formulaic than the litany, and some of them become quite lengthy as speakers dwell on familiar dimensions of the performance occasion.

It makes most sense to discuss these by occasion.

For greetings:

(8) *nye palabra i saludo*
Just this word of greeting
nyetxá kwatabonjiyetenoxebwachina
since I see that we have surely come together once again

For the carnival pardon:

(9) *tempska yayanga besawelanga tmetsekostumbra palabrena*
From the old days our grandparents have kept this custom
nye testigona kaba kem palabrena kwanetsekedana
only a part of this custom remains to us
kwamenetsabojanya ndoka remidiona
and we are surely conserving it so be it

For the wedding pardon:

(a) the charter is presented—

(10) *ndoka remidio san jose bendito*
So be it the blessed Saint Joseph
chká tojajtse kach mamita perdona
in this way came before the Virgin for the pardon
perdon tbojoftsetjañe
He asked her permission to marry
chká bnga pobrena txojuftsajatambana
In this way he left us poor mortals an example
mntxá kach mamitana inwetsashekwastona
thus to the Virgin we are following in his footsteps

(b) and sage advice is delivered—

(11) *mnteskamena ndoka remidiona kargo tkondentxetaye*
 From this day on so be it you are given the burden
bndatabe saludama estomadama kwerpoama
 for your health, food, and clothing
i ndoñe nye bndatabe bariebiamasna
 And not only on your own behalf.
sino dios karidad tkmojaftsebema
 But God in His bounty has given you a wife
kompañerbiamanaka jutsenowisiayana
 for your companion you must do what is right

For the burial of a child:

(12) *ndoka remidio okasionaka atxebe diosa*
 So be it there is trouble by my God
mntxá kwaxunobobiyana kwaxunjetana
 Thus surely it dawned and surely it became dark
ndoka remidio atxebe diosa karidado xojaftsebema bweñina
 So be it my God bountiously gave to me a son
ndoka remidio bngabe btsá ndweño ketsomiñekana
 So be it our Father remains the owner of all things
kwatabuntsatayañe kwaxjatoyingakuñe
 Surely He has received him, surely He has taken him from me

Performative formulas. These are the locutions carrying the distinctive illocutionary force (Austin 1962) of Kamsá ritual language, the speech acts of requesting a blessing, conferring a blessing, and requesting the interlocutor's patience.

(13) *xuchjaisebokwedana xuchjaiselisentsiana*
 May He protect me, may He have mercy on me

(14) *chaxuwipasentsia chaxuwiperdona*
 May He forgive us, may He pardon us

These two formulas entreat the blessing from the Christian deities. Their parallel structure coincides with the significance of their task; poetic affect correlates with seriousness of purpose. The next formula moves beyond beseeching the blessing, and allows the speaker to stand in for God and His earthly representatives and confer the blessing:

(15) *ndoka remidio polvo jabtsokeda*

Chicunque presents an intricate progression of verbal roots and morphological casings, with the same roots displayed in different casings and similar casings provided for different verbal roots:

(1) line 3

chkmunjiyobokweda chkmunjilesentsia

May They protect you, may They preserve you

(2) line 5

kwaxiyobokweda kwaxilisesentsia

Surely They are protecting me, surely They are preserving me

(3) line 15

xuchjaisebokwedana xuchjaiselesentsiana

As long as He will protect me, as long as He will preserve me

(4) line 17

xojiitsobokwedana xojiitselisentsia

He is protecting me, He is preserving me

(5) line 19

chaxuwipasentsia chaxuwiperdona

May He forgive me, may He pardon me

(6) line 22

xmojatpasentsia xmojatobwabnatse

Please forgive me, please allow me to procede

This greeting is anchored by parallel constructions appearing every few lines (except in the occasion-marking section, lines 5–15) and foregrounding the alternation of like and unlike components, a constitutive device of all poetic discourse (Jakobson 1960). They move us through several gestures of dependency stressing human reliance on the will of the deities, and culminate in a performative utterance requesting permission to procede to the next segment of the speech event. The parallel phrases, themselves organized into pairs or triplets, provide a recurrent pulse in the rhythmic flow of utterance; they stand as a kind of structural bedrock in the production of ritual language speeches.

Some speeches manage telling combinations of ritual language content. One pattern involves the juxtaposition of time projected forward into the future and backward into the past. Consider the following cluster:

chabe mundo chabe lware tsjiyetsashekwestona
 In His world, in His place, I am following in their footsteps
chaxuwipasentsia chaxuwiperdona
 May He have mercy on me, may He forgive me
chentxa despuesna kanye kwenta jmaisnatxetaye
 There, later, each must give account
alma pamilla persona
 of soul, family, self

Pivoting around the performative in the middle are references to the beginning of time, the days of the Kamsá ancestors, and to the end of time, the climactic moment of the Christian judgment. The juxtaposition of these two time schemes marks the proper religious attitude, articulated in the intervening performative, as the consistent ethical thread stretching across the entire time continuum.

The aesthetic charter of Kamsá ritual language calls for considerable verbal dexterity. Speakers must spontaneously construct ponderous words, arrange them into artistic progressions, and create poignant conceptual clusters, all within the compass of a musical-poetic prosody. Those who can produce well-tailored speeches on the spur of the moment are highly respected, and some elders, especially former governors of the community, turn speech-making into a kind of verbal duel by pushing the pace of articulation to a velocity just short of the breaking point.

Contexts of usage

The Kamsá themselves construe the ritual language as foremost a language of public recitation, a public tongue for community transaction. For the Kamsá, its finest hour is the *saludo del gobernador*, the governor's address, which occurs January of each year as a new governor takes office. The Kamsá community gathers in the church at Sibundoy and the newly-elected governor acknowledges the support of the elders, promises to do his best for the community, and requests the cooperation of those assembled:

ndoka remidio mntxá tributariobe barie kwaxmetsobwiyena
 So be it on behalf of the elders you have called me
ko ndoka remidio ntxamo mase remidio
 So be it since there is no other remedy
chaisebema kanye nyantentskoñena
 I will do what I can for a single year

ndmwa opresido ndmwagenemenana xojiisamunatena
 Should I find that I have a need one day
respeto chakobojutsaperdey chtena
 I will inform you of it without losing respect that day
ko ndoka remidio mntxá xmunetsoyeonaye
 So be it thus you must obey me

Ritual language dominates talk in the cabildo, where all official business is transacted in its cadence. For this reason those elders who have served as governors of the community attain the sharpest fluidity in its production.

In addition, ritual language speeches occur in tandem with all rites of passage, as part of the *vereda* (hamlet, neighborhood) ceremonies that follow upon the excursion into town for the ministration of the priest. Weddings and funerals, for example, elicit extended ritual language speeches. The “wedding pardon” brings the groom, his father, and the bride’s father into a three-way exchange of ritual language, climaxing in the father blessing his son. Funerals involve several exchanges of ritual language (Juajibioy Chindoy 1965), including an invitation extended to friends and relatives to accompany the corpse to the cemetery and then to partake of “a drop” of chicha at the home of the bereaved family.

As striking as these formal ceremonies may be, they should not conceal the uses of Kamsá ritual language that gravitate toward the more casual, even conversational arenas. Ritual language occurs over a broad spectrum of situation, ranging from high ceremony where it appears in its most saturated form to everyday settings where it appears in attenuated form. In routine conversations snippets and echoes of ritual language appear as speakers attempt to enlist the support of their interlocutors. Any gathering involving the consumption of chicha elicits strains of the ritual language as part of the rite of distribution, a dramatization of deference and respect. At *chicha mingas* (labor parties) and *agradecimientos* (thanksgiving feasts), the host ceremoniously offers the first portion of chicha to a most deserving guest:

base bwatsendonatema atxebe mamajema
 A small drop of chicha my poor little mother
kwatenjabobuyishena wakiñabe baria
 surely she has prepared it on my son’s behalf
ainan katjuftsepresko bweta pamillangaftaka
 My heart rejoices with so many kindred present
trabajo tkobotsatxeta
 God’s work we have given to you

nyetxana metsenabxe

Please come and drink your fill

Even as the host speaks these words, the honored guest is responding:

dios le pay despagracho dios le pay

May God reward you, thank you, may God reward you

taita dios tojoremidia ndoñe wantadona

God our Father provides so that we do not lack

trabajo impado kbochjaftsaxetay

God's work we will also someday offer to you

In these less formal settings the ritual language intrudes as a touch of formality, reduced to the compass of a few lines of just a word or two.

Kamsá ritual language, then, evinces a diversified usage profile that intersects with the entire social universe of the community:

Ceremony:	governor's salute to the community, formal transactions in the cabildo.
Rites of passage:	weddings, funerals, baptisms, first communions, confirmations.
Secular ritual:	agradecimiento, carnival blessing, chicha minga.
Everyday:	greetings, farewells, requests, etc.

The more formal portions of this profile involve the production of actual speeches, discourse segments clearly set apart from surrounding or embedded conversational environments. Here the ritual language obtains its most distinctive and complete expression. The everyday settings call forth a fragmentary and provisional realization, brief allusions or nuances that can be readily worked into a conversational texture.

The range of usage is so encompassing that one is hardly ever out of earshot of the ritual language. Not a day passes without some official speech-making, and only the most intimate of conversations is entirely devoid of its presence. In formal settings, ritual language introduces the reciprocity of conversation, due to its inherent dialogic character; in casual settings, it echoes the staid aura of public ceremony. The ritual language is thus a verbal axis, an aesthetic drive running throughout the universe of Kamsá discourse and defining its essential character and purpose. It proposes a Kamsá community conceived as the ideal family whose harmonious collaboration, manifested already in the interplay of

linked voices, follows from a mutual allegiance to the example of the ancestors.

Private ends through public means

I have presented Kamsá ritual language as a source of cohesion among individuals potentially set apart from one another by any number of factors: age, gender, parentage, vereda affiliation, political faction, and prestige among others. Every human constituency beyond the individual requires some contrivance; Kamsá ritual language effects a renewal of the social contract by invoking a common foundation for a shared identity. By first modeling collaborative effort (Urban 1986), ritual language speeches propose further levels of cooperation. Acknowledgment of a universal ancestry presents the Kamsá community as a metaphorical and idealized family, an organic icon of community. The community-building mission of such discourse surfaces, as noted, in the confinement of all personal address to a world of fictive kinship. It is upon this contrived unity that the blessing from heaven must fall.

One might wonder just how constrictive this official burden might be: how open is Kamsá ritual language to the pursuit of individual goals and strategies? We have seen that it serves as a medium for community transactions; can it also service personal ambition? It is true that adoption of this rhetoric entails recognition of a communal interest tempering all personal initiatives. But it is also true that people can make use of the foregrounded ethic of social solidarity to pursue their own purposes. A clever or unscrupulous operator, we might assume, could use the verbal protocol to enlist community tradition in a self-serving, misguided, or even nefarious project. A community-building mission does not preclude self-aggrandizement but rather channels it into permissible means of expression.

These potentialities of the code are not readily addressed through direct questioning, for they lie outside the perimeter of the presentable self. They are more easily captured in the mythic narrative of the community, that perversely faithful mirror that a people holds up to itself, and particularly in humorous episodes, those moments of candor giving the lie to idealization. Let's consider a delightful Kamsá mythic narrative, "The Weasel's Story," the kind of story the elders will tell in the evenings around the hearth or in the late hours of a *chicha minga*. Its revelations call for some adjustment in the notion of Kamsá ritual language as an infallible precipitant of ideal community. We draw on a performance by Mariano Chicunque, and to a considerable degree it is the excellence of his rendition that makes possible the discussion of sociolinguistic issues relevant to this paper.

The Weasel's Story

Well, the one about the weasel.
The weasel in the old days was a doctor.
The weasel, a woman she was, a woman that weasel.
Ah, if I'm feeling sick, then it's off to the weasel's,
aunt mother, there, aunt mother,
to ask for help from that weasel.

Well. Heaven forbid, all of a sudden,
he came down with something,
that deer, he came down with something.
He was like a person in those days.
And he went to solicit her help, since he was sick,
that she might cure him.

And then that aunt mother, that weasel, he found,
that weasel was sitting there.
He entreated that aunt mother:
"Aunt Mother, as it happens, God has bestowed upon you
the knowledge of the medicines. For this I have come,
I am not feeling well, I need a treatment."

"By Our Lord.
So you are not feeling well, Father Nephew.
Then come and sit here.
Let me see, take off those clothes."
He took his clothes off, he undressed.

Ah, right away she picked up the curing branches,
as they are called, she began to brush him.
Ah, she wanted him, that aunt mother weasel, ah.
"Hot pepper, hot pepper, onion onion, salt salt."
She wanted him.

And so she circled around and around that sick fellow,
from one side to the other, she circled around him.
Then that deer, that young man,
he didn't like what he was hearing.
Then without asking permission, he dressed himself again.

And then he said to her:
"Aunt Mother, I think you got the words wrong."
"Just so it is, just as I'm speaking,
that's just how it is."
"Ah, but I had better be on my way."
Then he left her behind, that doctor, he just took off.

Later his father heard about it.

"Ah, so that's it, that weasel a doctor."

"Here's how she made fun of me, ah,
just 'hot pepper, hot pepper' as she brushed me with the curing branches."

Then his father responded:

"Be careful, we poor creatures are food for her.

And so, 'salt salt, onion, hot pepper, hot pepper.'

We poor creatures are for eating,
and so she thought to feed on you.

Now don't go back there, don't ever go again.

Lord no, just take it easy."

That's how this tale goes, just as I have told it,
by Our Lord.

There is a strong ethnolinguistic bent to this story, for the plot turns on the correctness or otherwise of a speech act, the doctor's curing chant. As it happens, her words are not the appropriate "singing to the spirits" which should establish her pedigree as a curer and invoke the spirit helpers; instead she invokes a set of culinary helpers (salt, onion, hot pepper) in anticipation of a good meal. Here the successful accomplishment of the speech act is frustrated by its inappropriate content. In contrast, the words exchanged between doctor and patient accurately mirror the ceremonious discourse appropriate to such occasions of formal entreaty. The ritual language makes an unequivocal appearance in their initial exchange:

bata mama tkmoftselesentsia shnanatem kwabwatemaka

Aunt Mother, as it happens God has bestowed upon you the knowledge
of the medicines

We encounter several familiar ritual language elements: the use of the kinship term for personal address; the invocation of a divine charter for human activity; the weighty logism based on the Spanish-derived root *lesentsia*; the use of the diminutive *-tem* in conjunction with the word for medicine. And the crafty Aunt Mother responds appropriately to the young man's declaration, using the empathy marker *ar señoraka*, "By our Lord" and addressing him as *taita sobren*, "Father Nephew."

"The Weasel's Story" thus portrays (and mocks) two special uses of the Kamsá language, one a poorly executed "singing to the spirits" and the other a well executed but poorly timed entreaty for medical assistance. These demonstrations alert us to the fact that discourse can be treacherous, even when executed in accordance with the traditional speech charter. Spurious doctors can feign "singing to the spirits" (though perhaps

not convincingly) in an attempt to exploit (in this case, devour) their patients, and people can employ ritual language discourse in misguided or even deceiving projects. This story is inherently humorous, portraying the encounter between a naive petitioner and a bumbling predator; its humorous impact is significantly increased by the narrator's skillful impersonation of these protagonists through a realistic representation of their speech.

These dramatizations not only draw us into the story by animating the plot (McDowell 1982); paradoxically, their humor also produces some ironic distance on human beings and their machinations. The exchange of ritual language between deer and weasel, between prey and predator, stands as the archetype of all exploitative uses of the code; that deer could *ceremoniously* entreat his doom, and weasel acquiesce in the same vein, dispells any lingering notions of the code's imperviousness to selfish manipulation. Kamsá ritual language, for all its fabrication of community, can certainly play a role in misguided and even nefarious schemes. In this narrative the Kamsá reveal something that is rarely directly articulated, for elicited commentary on the ritual language tends to emphasize its positive, idealized aspect.

Still, such moments of candor should not discredit the overall enterprise. Kamsá ritual language is indeed a program for blessing communal effort, as can be observed in an impressive array of recurring public events. It remains, as I have stated, the public, Catholic-inspired, community-building counterpart of the spiritual cures effected by the native doctors. Blessing and cure are the separate branches, one social and the other spiritual, of a Kamsá survival plan founded on emulation of the ancestral model.

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APPENDIX

Kamsá Phonemic System
(after Howard 1977)

Consonants					
	Labial	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar
Stop vl.	p	t			k
Obstruent vd.	b	d			g
Affricate vl.		ts	tx	ch	
Fricative vl.	f	s	x	sh	j
Nasal vd.	m	n		ñ	
Lateral vd.		l		ll	
Vibrant vd.		r			
Semivowels vd.	w			y*	

*This semivowel has a voiced alveolar affricate allophone [dz] after [n].

Vowels			
	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Low	e	a	o

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